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AUTHOR Perry, Raymond P.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The effects of test performance feedback (contingent, noncontingent, control) and teacher expressiveness (low, high) on student achievement in a simulated college classroom were investigated. Subjects (N=75) wrote an analogies test which provided either contingent or noncontingent performance feedback, after which they viewed a videotaped lecture presented by either a low or high expressiveness instructor. Control subjects did not write an analogies test, but simply viewed either a low or high expressiveness instructor. Following the lecture, all subjects completed a teacher evaluation and a multiple-choice examination. Results indicated that the high expressive instructor produced greater achievement than the low expressive instructor in both the contingent and noncontingent feedback conditions. Also, achievement was greater in the noncontingent than in the control condition under high instructor expressiveness. (Author)

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Learned Helplessness in the College Classroom:

Are Teacher Characteristics Involved?

Raymond P. Perry, Les Leventhal, Philip C. Abrami

and Wenda Dickens

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Running head: Learned Helplessness in the College Classroom

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Learned Helplessness in the College Classroom:

Are Teacher Characteristics Involved?

Since Seligman's early research on learned helplessness (e.g., Overmier & Seligman, 1967), the phenomenon has been demonstrated in many infrahuman species and man. Essentially, the phenomenon occurs when an organism learns, through a series of training trials, that escape from aversive stimulation and/or the occurrence of reinforcement are independent of responding. An expectancy is learned that reinforcement is uncontrollable which, in turn, interferes with learning new response-reinforcement contingencies. According to Seligman (1975), the behavioral manifestations of learned helplessness include: motivational deficits (e.g., passivity, submissiveness, inability to learn, lack of readiness to respond), emotional symptoms (e.g., poor attention span, weight loss, ulceration, defecation), and cognitive deficits as well.

The pervasiveness of learned helplessness suggests that the phenomenon may occur in the classroom. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students periodically experience response feedback contingencies in the educational system that may foster expectancies similar to learned helplessness. For example, the student who feels (s)he knows the course material, but who repeatedly fails examinations, may develop expectancies of uncontrollability regarding future learning. Such classroom conditions may be one source of student apathy and drop-out. Dweck (1975) and others (Dweck & Reppucci, 1973) have conducted several experiments into learned helplessness in elementary school settings. Their research

suggests that noncontingent response feedback can have deleterious effects on elementary school children on subsequent tasks, and that attribution-retraining can reduce the deleterious effects.

Learned helplessness has not been studied in the broader classroom context, however, which includes such variables as teacher characteristics, course content, reading materials, examination procedures, etc. Students' previous exposure to learned helplessness conditions may interact with these variables to influence subsequent student achievement. For example, an effective instructor may offset the deleterious impact of noncontingent learning experiences such that subsequent performance may improve. Such an instructor may make difficult material more easy to understand, or boring material more interesting, leading to student attributions of control over course material. An ineffective instructor may augment the negative consequences of previous noncontingent learning experiences by making course material difficult to comprehend. Lack of content organization, enthusiasm for material, etc., by instructor may create attributions of uncontrollability in the student.

Research at the post-secondary level has not demonstrated consistent effects of teacher characteristics on student achievement (e.g., McKeachie & Kulik, 1975). This problem is due, in part, to methodological weaknessess, and to the lack of experiments in which teacher characteristics were actually manipulated. Recently, some researchers investigating teaching effectiveness have directly manipulated instructor expressiveness using physical movement, voice inflection, eye contact, humor, etc., (Perry, Abrami, & Leventhal, 1976; Williams & Ware, 1976). Their results

suggest that high expressiveness produces more student achievement than low expressiveness under certain experimental conditions. The purpose of the present experiment was to determine whether differential response-reinforcement feedback conditions (learned helplessness) that may exist in certain college classrooms interact with teaching expressiveness to affect subsequent student achievement.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 75 male and female Introductory Psychology students who participated for course credits. Subjects signed up for certain testing times and experimental conditions were then assigned to times.

Materials

The materials included an analogies test, answer sheets, and video-taped lectures. The analogies test consisted of 30 multiple-choice items each having four alternatives. The answer sheets were constructed so that when the subject selected an answer for an item, (s)he received immediate feedback regarding whether the choice was correct. Two versions of the answer sheets were used which provided either contingent or non-contingent feedback. The contingent answer sheet contained items with the correct alternative identified, such that the subject received a point for the item only by selecting the correct alternative. The non-contingent answer sheet contained 9 items in which all four response alternatives were designated as correct, and 21 items in which the

four response alternatives were designated as incorrect. The intention here was to create testing conditions in which no matter which alternative the subject selected, (s)he was incorrect and lost a point. Nine items were included with correct alternatives in order to maintain the credibility of the test by ensuring that the subject obtained some points.

Two videotaped lectures on the topic of sex-role stereotyping were used which varied in instructor expressiveness. Expressiveness was manipulated (low, high) using a procedure similar to that employed by Williams and Ware (1976), Perry, Abrami, and Leventhal (1976), and Perry (1977). The exact procedures for constructing low and high expressiveness presentations are outlined in detail in these sources. Content was equated in the low and high expressive conditions through the use of lecture notes.

Procedure

Before viewing the videotape lecture, the subjects either wrote an analogies test or served as no-test controls. Test subjects received either the contingent or noncontingent answer sheets. Following the analogies test, the test subjects answered a question assessing the degree to which their motivation determined their test score using a nine-point continuum ranging from "not at all" to "totally". All subjects then viewed the videotape lecture, with half the subjects seeing the low expressive instructor, and the other half seeing the high expressive instructor. Following the lecture, subjects were asked to rate the instructor's overall teaching ability using a five-point continuum

ranging from "excellent" to "poor", and to complete a 20 item multiple-choice exam based on the lecture. At the end of the experiment all subjects were debriefed.

Design

Instructor expressiveness (low, high) and analogies test performance feedback (contingent, noncontingent, control) were combined to form a 2 x 3 between groups factorial design. The dependent variables were an achievement test score (total correct), a motivation level rating, and a teacher effectiveness rating.

Results

Consistent with learned helplessness theory, motivation level scores showed that noncontingent feedback subjects rated themselves lower than contingent feedback subjects, F (1,48) = 4.61, $p < .037$. The motivational ratings were consistent with performance on the analogies test in that contingent subjects scored much higher ($\bar{X}$ = 17.11) than the noncontingent subjects ($\bar{X}$ = 8.20). That is, noncontingent subjects, who did much poorer on the analogies test than contingent subjects, attributed their motivation as less responsible for their performance. Student ratings of teaching effectiveness revealed that the high expressive instructor was rated significantly higher than the low expressive instructor, F (1, 69) = 138.43, $p < .001$.

An instructor expressiveness (low, high) by feedback (contingent, noncontingent, control) analysis of variance on student achievement showed a main effect for expressiveness, F (1, 69) = 18.81, $p < .001$, and an expressiveness by feedback interaction, F (2, 69) = 3.97, $p < .023$

(see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

The simple main effect (Kirk, 1968) of feedback at high expressiveness was significant, F (2, 69) = 3.50, $p < .036$, but was not significant at low expressiveness. Multiple t comparisons at high expressiveness revealed that the noncontingent subjects had higher achievement than the control subjects, t (69) = 2.21, $p < .011$, the contingent subjects, t (69) = 1.61, $p < .11$, and the control and contingent groups combined, t (69) = 2.49, $p < .015$. Expressiveness comparisons between feedback conditions indicated no achievement differences for the control conditions, however, high expressiveness produced more achievement than low expressiveness for contingent feedback, t (69) = 2.41, $p < .05$, and for noncontingent feedback, t (69) = 4.68, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The present experiment indicates that the learned helplessness concept may have some utility for understanding classroom dynamics, but not without further development. The motivation differences between the contingent and noncontingent feedback conditions suggest that the analogies test may be a useful procedure for inducing learned helplessness in some classroom simulations. The advantage of this procedure is that it has certain features that resemble classroom conditions which may contribute to learned helplessness. Specifically, group-testing and multiple choice items are used unlike present procedures which test subjects individually,

and which rely on aversive stimulation, (e.g., shock, white noise) finger mazes, anagrams, etc., for inducing learned helplessness.

Student achievement data showed that previous learning experiences differentially interact with instructor expressiveness. For high expressiveness conditions an interesting pattern developed in which post-lecture achievement was much greater for subjects previously exposed to noncontingent response feedback conditions. While all differences between the high expressiveness conditions were not significant, a consistent pattern emerged in which achievement increased progressively from the control to the contingent to the noncontingent conditions. The low expressiveness results were insignificant, however, a consistent trend in the opposite direction to the high expressiveness conditions was evident.

Wortman and Brehm's integrative model of reactance and learned helplessness (1975) may have some utility in explaining these trends, and especially the noncontingent feedback results. They claim that exposure to noncontingent conditions results in increased efforts to establish control subsequently. Exposure to a high expressiveness instructor following the analogies test may instill attributions of control (mastery)over the subject matter (content) and may facilitate achievement. Exposure to a low expressiveness instructor may create attributions of uncontrollability, and may debilitate performance. Achievement results for the noncontingent high expressiveness condition (15.17) compared to the noncontingent low expressiveness condition (9.85) help support this analysis.

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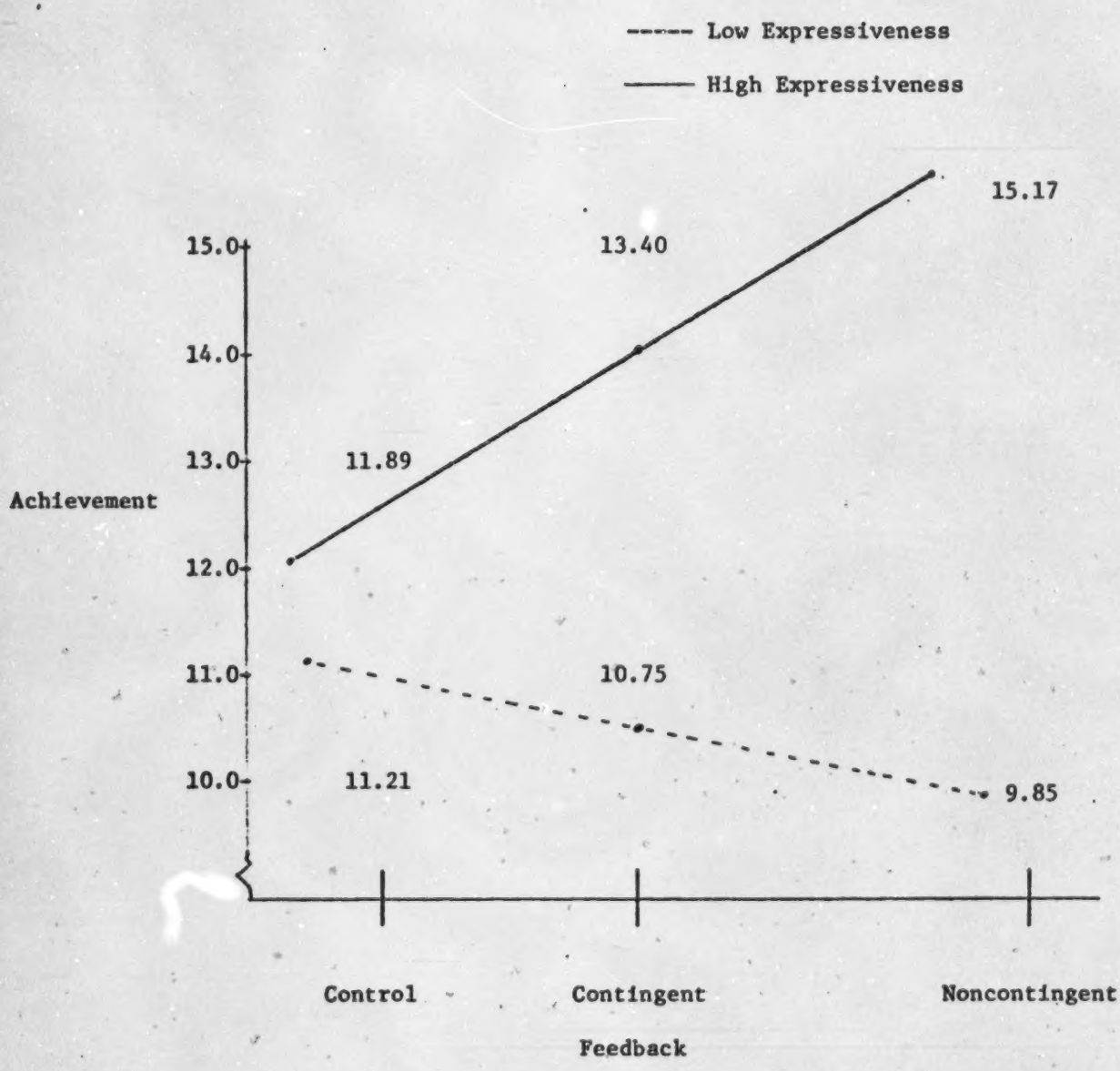
Figure Caption

Figure 1. Instructor expressiveness and feedback as they influence student achievement.


----- Low Expressiveness
——— High Expressiveness
15.17
15.0
13.40
14.0
13.0
11.89
Achievement
12.0
11.0
10.75
10.0
11.21
9.85
Control
Contingent
Noncontingent
Feedback